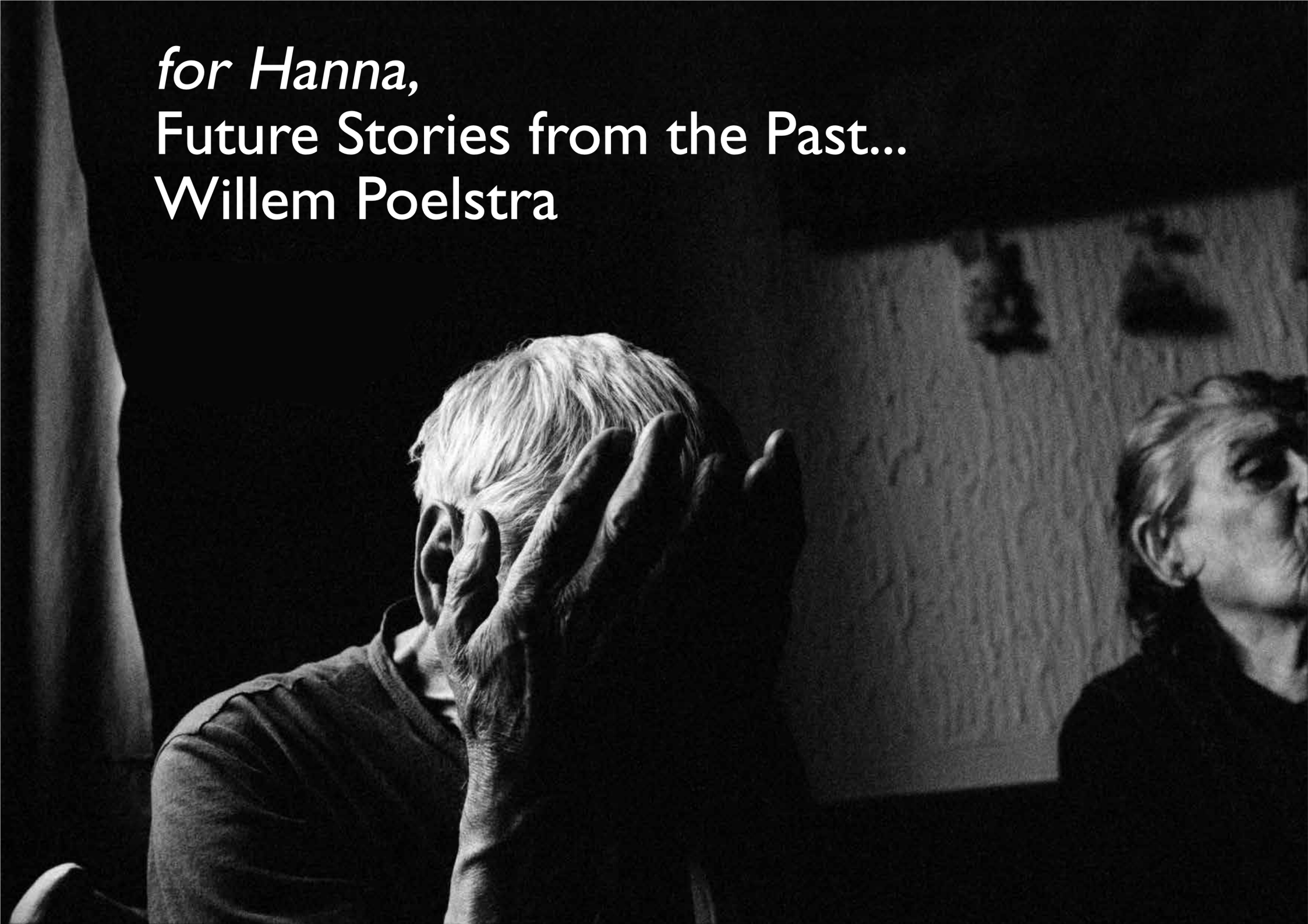


*for Hanna,*  
Future Stories from the Past...  
Willem Poelstra



## Introduction

“My father left me a cardboard box when he died. ‘For Willem’, it said in my father’s handwriting. I found the box in my parental house, on the Dutch countryside. Inside were all kinds of documents: business cards, telegrams, newspaper clippings, prayer cards, photos, postcards, a poetry album and two family trees, each neatly bound into a pedigree book.

This was January 2011. My mother had died eight years before. Once I got home in Amsterdam, I started browsing through the box. I saw family snapshots, handwritten notes, birth announcements and other official deeds and documents I had never seen before.

Then I started on the two pedigree books detailing my family’s genealogy, dating back to the 1930s. I was shocked to learn about the actual size of my mother’s family. My mother Hanna Poelstra-Vingerhoets was Jewish, born in 1927. It turned out her mother had had four sisters and a brother she never told me about. Nor had she ever said anything about distant relatives living in New York and London. For the first time in my life I learned about the devastating impact of the Holocaust on my mother’s family’s.

I took the pedigree books to the memorial centre Camp Westerbork, where researchers helped me to investigate the wartime fates of my family members. The results were discouraging: a list of 92 family members, most of whom had been gassed in the death camps all over Europe. Only a few family members managed to survive.

But that wasn’t the only thing I learned from the box I inherited. It turned out to hold more family secrets. A Dutch translation of Mein Kampf, among others; a local 1939 edition of the book that Hitler had written in the 1920s with the aid of his secretary, Rudolf Hess. This book has been banned from sale in the Netherlands since the 1970s.

I knew that my father Albert Poelstra had worked as an engineer at a locomotive factory in Berlin during the war. He sometimes mentioned proudly that he had contributed to making the steam locomotives more efficient for use on German railways when he was there. The documents in the box, however, revealed to me that my father had worked in Nazi Germany for much longer than he had ever wanted to tell. He had moved to Berlin early in 1941. Another photo showed Albert with his German colleague Bertl; Albert wrote his name on the back of picture. They worked for the Schichau Werke, a factory that built over four thousand locomotives during the war, but also constructed warships and submarines. The soaring production targets were met by bringing in many forced labourers and concentration camp prisoners to work at the Schichau Werke.

At the end of March 1945, Albert was assigned to a new job in the factory’s technical design department. The Russians were getting closer and Berlin was being bombed by Allied planes. He was 25 years old when he was admitted to a hospital with shrapnel in his leg and side. He fled back to the Netherlands not long after, ahead of the approaching Red Army. Berlin fell on 2 May 1945.”

Willem Poelstra (1956-2018)

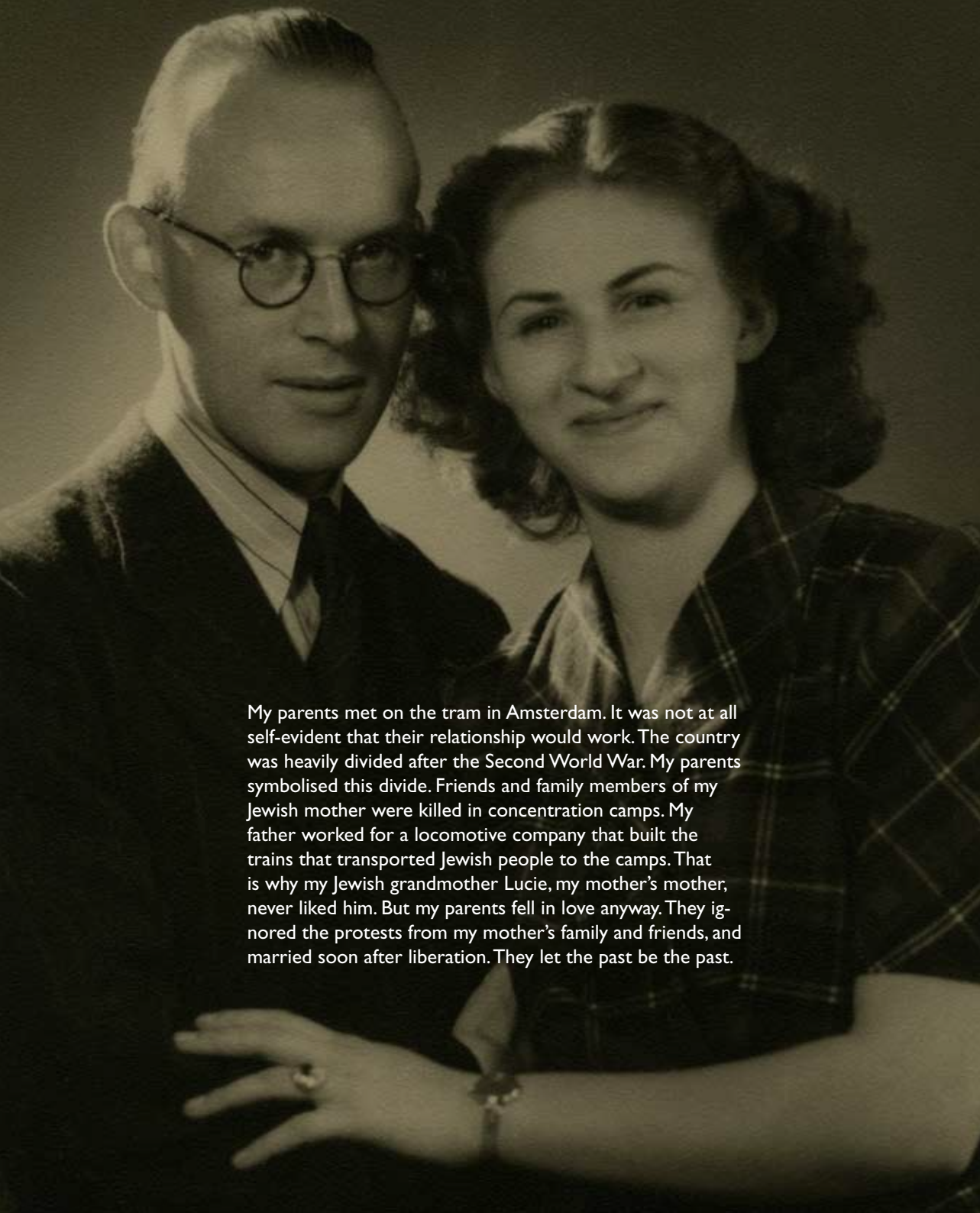


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## About Willem Poelstra

Willem Poelstra (1956-2018) was a documentary photographer from Amsterdam, the Netherlands. After a successful career as a professional diver and as a manager in both the offshore and the advertising industry, he changed to photography. In 2005, he graduated with honours from the Amsterdam Photo Academy. He made the book *I 12 Ambulance Amsterdam* (2008) and an in-depth coverage of a working-class neighbourhood in The Hague, among others. His work was awarded several Silver Camera Awards, the most important prize for photography in The Netherlands. For more than five years he worked on his Kosovo-project *for Hanna*, *Future Stories From the Past...* that resulted in both a traveling exhibition and photobook.

Willem Poelstra has sadly passed away in October 2018. Before he died, he founded the Forhanna foundation to keep supporting in-depth documentary photography.



My parents met on the tram in Amsterdam. It was not at all self-evident that their relationship would work. The country was heavily divided after the Second World War. My parents symbolised this divide. Friends and family members of my Jewish mother were killed in concentration camps. My father worked for a locomotive company that built the trains that transported Jewish people to the camps. That is why my Jewish grandmother Lucie, my mother's mother, never liked him. But my parents fell in love anyway. They ignored the protests from my mother's family and friends, and married soon after liberation. They let the past be the past.

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My mother Hanna Vingerhoets (1927 - 2003) was relieved her daughter only had sons. The Jewish bloodline is passed down through the mother, so it would end with my sister's sons and me. There would be no more victims on her side of the family, she said. Hanna fled Amsterdam during the Second World War. A farmer family in the countryside took her in and kept her safe while several of her aunts were killed in the concentration camps Sobibor and Auschwitz.



My father Albert Poelstra (1920 - 2011) loved politics and debating, and had a broad range of interests. His father, once secretary of the Dutch Communist Party, had high expectations of his children. Albert graduated as an engineer shortly before the Second World War. Hoping to find work, he decided to move to Berlin. It was a decision that would stick to him for the rest of his life. He found a job at *Schichau-Werke*, a locomotive construction company where the trains were built that deported Jews to the concentration camps. He returned to the Netherlands at the end of the war when the Russian army arrived, afraid they might consider him a collaborator.



## Universal love

Willem wanted to do more than just learn about his parents untold past. He decided to mirror their shared history to present-day stories of war and the deep scars it leaves on people and their communities. And to show a timeless story that keeps repeating itself. But he also wanted to tell a hopeful story of love as a universal force that brings people together.

This brought him to Kosovo, where he travelled for the first time in early 2012. This tiny country on the Western Balkans, once a province of Serbia, was the stage for the last of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. These wars shattered marriages and friendships, pushing neighbours to slaughter one another. The stories told by the numerous people he met in Kosovo were confronting and recognisable at times. Until this very day, the Albanian majority and Serbian minority in Kosovo are deeply divided and the traces of war still visible.

Willem kept coming back to Kosovo for five years and encountered numerous communities that are marked by a dark past. But he also met courageous people who managed to overcome their feelings of hatred. Who dared to take risks and leave the past behind. Just like his own parents did.

Willem's parents paid a price for falling in love. They had to keep their past hidden for their son and daughter. Because their past could have driven them apart.





‘Our future is  
outside the Balkan’



Beaten up by nationalists  
for dating a Serbian girl





Communities are  
divided by more than  
just religion



They didn't dare to tell  
their parents

## A layered project on the impact of war

This project offers a thought-provoking insight into the long-lasting effects of a devastating war. It shows the permanent changes on a people and their land. Willem's work is characterised by an open approach and intensive methods. He often went back to villages, cafés and other places he had frequented before, and met again and again with people to win their trust before taking their picture. The result is a layered project on the impact of war on the lives of ordinary people: someone who survived an execution during the war; a mother who lost her son years after due to continuing ethnic violence; a woman who lost her legs on a landmine as a child; a man who was shot over an ongoing land dispute.

The project also visualises how the war scared the Kosovar landscape. It shows destroyed graveyards and carcasses of empty houses, and the numerous memorial sites for fallen soldiers standing along the road. The project also reveals the long-term impact of war on a society, by focussing on protests, and showing intimate portraits of prostitutes and drug addicts.

## Events and other outcomes of the project

The outcomes of the project *for Hanna*, Future Stories from the Past... were produced by Forhanna, a non-profit production house from the Netherlands that was founded by Willem Poelstra to help him finish his project and support other in-depth documentary photography projects.

1. The first version of the project was exhibited at the international photography biennale BredaPhoto 2012 and Het Nutshuis in The Hague 2013.
2. A major outdoor exhibition took place in front of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo in Pristina in October 2016. A debate evening was organised to discuss the project with young Kosovars.
3. An indoor exhibition was held at the Parobrod Gallery in the Serbian capital of Belgrade, in July 2018. A special publication about the project was issued in cooperation with Grain magazine and a debate was organised to discuss the project with witnesses of the events that took place in Kosovo in 1998/1999.
4. A masterclass on visual storytelling for professional photographers from Serbia and Kosovo was organised in Belgrade, parallel to the exhibition and with the aim to bring divided communities together through what they share instead of what divides them. *for Hanna*, Future Stories from the Past... was used as a case study.
5. The book *for Hanna*, Future Stories from the Past... was published by Forhanna in 2017. The book was added to the collection of the Belgrade University Library.



## Witness

We left the land behind  
covered by the ash of houses and flesh,  
like everything else, too heavy  
to be carried on backs or bare hands.

we pushed the elderly in wheelbarrows,  
strapped the infants to our chests like ammunition,  
and took flight in the snow.

At the road's last bend I turned in tears  
To see the roof of my house snap in half  
Like a tree bit by the jaws of a hungry lightning

I could feel the heat of the burning threshold  
pulsing under my tongue.

I bit through it to stay alive  
And slowly chewed through the memory  
Cautiously rationing the blood for three days.

When we arrived at the border  
An endless caravan of ragged souls  
ripping from spines with every step  
Slowly hemorrhaged through the exit wound checkpoint

There was a soldier with a screwdriver  
Removing wedding bands from women's fingers,  
His hands were a colony of hungry fire ants  
Burning through the layers of my clothing.

A captain with a hawk sitting on his shoulder  
Counted our heads. He collected pleasant features  
with his pocket knife, and fed his bird  
eyeballs and women's nipples.  
When it swallowed, breast milk dripped off its beak  
The color of the muddy snow.

Others sat by the fire,  
next to the pile of car tags, kidneys,  
passports, jars of pickled hands, and land deeds.

They drank vodka from a dead baby's bottle  
sharing their fresh kill with the wolves  
and a bloody hound, playing a drunk accordion.

At the checkpoint they stripped us  
off our boys and men,  
told us to cross alone,  
And never look back.

When they unhinged their guns' gates  
A stampede of angry bullets roared like a mob  
Cheering their favorite dictator.

They aimed their hooves at our men  
Grinding their bones into soft, pink salt.

their souls tore out of their bodies  
like legless birds escaping a collapsing city.

They hovered over our heads for days  
Unable to land anywhere.

They were caught in the net of a photographer  
Who sold them by the pound to foreign newspapers.

The editorials showed pictures of bodies covered in dirt  
The headlines read "ETHNIC CLEANSING"

The civilized world was appalled.

They said, that kind of behavior is a no-no.

They stuffed UN resolutions into our mouths  
and call it a peaceful solution.

Forgive, they said, it is time to move on.  
Be civilized. Shake hands.  
Sit here. Sign there.  
Smile for the camera.

*Jonida Beqo*







### Finally Ibadete could play outside again

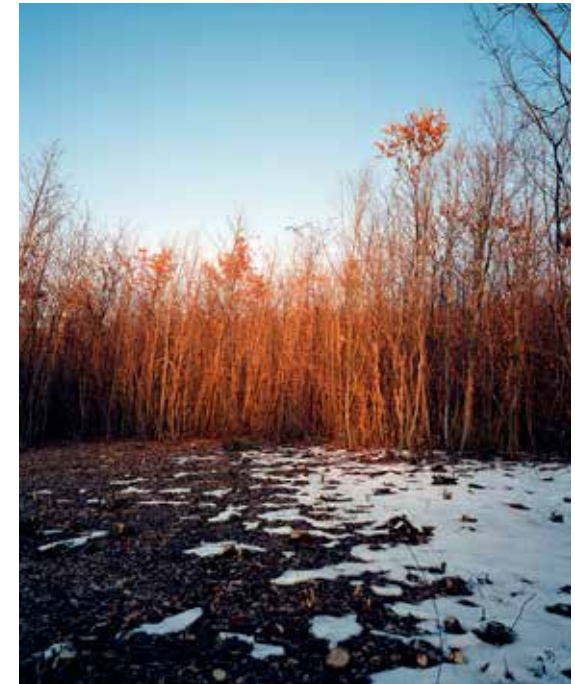
It was only a few days after the end of the war when thirteen-year-old Ibadete picked up a water bucket. She didn't notice the attached booby-trap and lost both her legs.





‘My uncle called my name, but I was too scared to answer’

‘When I was thirteen years old, I was executed. All the men from my village were lined up. The bullets went through my hand, leg and head. My family thought I was dead. They had already dug my grave.’



**‘I was in the garden when the missile struck’**

Nikola was five years old when a missile hit the transmission tower on the hill near Banskja / Bajskë, his village in northern Kosovo. ‘Years later, my throat started to hurt,’ he says. ‘We went to see a doctor. He told me these were the first symptoms of a tumour. In a hospital in Belgrade a tiny metal shrapnel was found in my throat.’ The missile likely contained depleted uranium.









‘It took ten minutes  
to get all the drugs  
you wanted’



























'I don't want to bring up the past. I live here and now, I want to look to the future.'





### ‘My son wanted to become a UÇK soldier’

‘We didn’t let him. Sometimes I regret it. Maybe it would’ve been better if he had become a soldier. Maybe he would still be alive. And if he had died, people would’ve thought of him as a hero. They would’ve been proud and put up a monument for him.’





'It feels as if he is still missing'

'There is a memorial to commemorate the massacre in Klinë / Klina, but my father's grave is not there. I find it hard to accept that there's no place where we can visit him.'



Haki Bica

30.07.1967 Gre...

Nevzat Raci

09.08.1976 Sige...

Kushtrim Raci

07.04.1984 Klinë

Isa Gashi

03.05.1956 Sve...

HAJRIZ BORINCA

17.10.1960Jashan...

Hysni Krasniqi

18.07.1977 Klinë

REFIK ...et MAXHUNI

ME 1974 NE GUAROVET

Smajl Manaj

25.10.1973 Klinë

Kamer Seferaj

09.1981Klinë

KEMAJL (FETAH) KOCA

25.04.1979 - 15.04.1999

Driton Abit Smakoll...

...

im Raif Zhegrova

...

Sadik Zeciri

...

Besim Elez Terps...

...

Nezir Gjevat Shabani

...

Dr. Adem Ademi

...

Burim Rexhepaj

05.06.1980

Feriz Rexhepaj

11.05.1977 Zaber...

HALIM KELMENDI

...

Jashkim Rexhe...

29.09.1974 Zaber...

QAMIL BERISHA

06.02.1950 KLINë

Veseli Morina

11.12.1956-Klinë

Adil Mustafa

1970 Jash...

Arben Murat Emiri

...

Fidai N. Borishti

1980 - 1999

SHAGRIBE KAJOLLI

17.01.1971









## FORHANNA FOUNDATION

FORHANNA is a not-for-profit production house from Amsterdam, the Netherlands. We are a co-producer and a catalyst, aiming to maximise the impact of promising documentary photography and film projects. Projects that are supported by FORHANNA are of high visual quality, show a deep social awareness and seek to encourage public debate about topics that are inherently conflicted.

We want to help artists connect with art institutions, funding agencies and the media, among others. We help seeking funds to close the budget and to formulate a clear output, production schedule, and seek to strategically position the project to maximise the project's impact.

### Costs of the exhibition

An indoor and outdoor exhibition of the project for Hanna, Future Stories from the Past... are readily available. Upon request, adjustments can be made that fit the preferences of the curator or the venue. A cost calculation can be made and sent upon request.

### Contact

For general enquiries, please contact [office@forhanna.com](mailto:office@forhanna.com)

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